

La Barrière: Metis Resistance at St. Norbert

Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell¹

St. Norbert is a Métis settlement dating back to 1822. St. Norbert was the center of the early events connected with the Red River Resistance. It was here, on October 19, 1869, at a public meeting held at St. Norbert Roman Catholic Church, that the Métis elected the *Comite national des Métis* with Louis Riel as secretary.

On October 20, 1869 the Metis learned that Lt. Governor designate McDougall was heading north with a large quantity of rifles and ammunition. On the following day, October 21, 1869, Riel and several councilors went to St. Norbert to discuss this development with Abbé Ritchot and Abbé Dugas. They were joined by a number of men who Ritchot described as armed with “a musket, a revolver, a powder horn, a bag of cartridges, with a dirk or hunting knife.” Among these men were National Committee members Paul Proulx, Amable Gaudry and Prosper Nault. As their first act the *Comite national des Métis* sanctioned the erection of a barrier across the Pembina Trail to keep out unwanted emissaries of the Canadian Government This barrier was constructed just north of where the road from Pembina crossed the Rivière Sale. The *Comite national des Métis* also drafted a notice to McDougall ordering him not to enter the North West Territory without the express permission of the Committee. They gave this notice to Jean Baptiste Ritchot *dit* Janvier with instructions to personally deliver it to McDougall. On October 22, Ritchot set out for Pembina accompanied by Benjamin Nault, Jean Baptiste Nault, Martin Jerome and some other young men. It is noteworthy that Ritchot and the two Naults had been with Riel when he stopped the surveyors on October 11, 1869.

On the 22nd of October, Walter Hyman, a tanner and Canadian party member, complained to Dr. Cowan that on the afternoon of October 21st, about forty armed men had billeted themselves in houses adjoining Rivière Sale near the Pembina road, where they lay in wait for Governor McDougall, in order to turn him out of the country, while another party, mounted and comprising perhaps twenty men were patrolling the highway and country about Scratching River with the same intention.²

Alex McArthur, a HBC employee reports:

...on a cold raw morning in the last days of October, 1869, I was approaching the River Salle (sic), some nine or ten miles south of Fort Garry...when word came from a house on the wayside that we should be stopped before crossing the river. When within a few hundred yards of the bridge an obstruction, something like a pole fence, appeared across the whole width of the road, which on either side was here bounded by poplar woods.

¹ Lawrence Barkwell is a member of the St. Norbert Parish La Barrière Metis Council.

² A.G. Morice, *A Critical History of the Red River Insurrection*. Winnipeg: Canadian Publishers, 1935: 123.

A few men with guns in their hands were standing on the other side of the barricade. One of their number was dispatched to a tannery which stood in a hollow close by the bridge, and in a few minutes returned with someone having authority. After a few questions some poplar poles were thrown aside from the slight construction in front of us, and we were allowed to pass through. ... we were told that the rather simple looking obstruction across the road was intended to keep out Governor McDougall and his whole retinue and, strange as it may seem, it effected this purpose.³

Near the present church stands the Riel-Ritchot Monument. The rear of the monument provides a summary of the events that took place at St. Norbert. Across the street from the church is La Chapelle de Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Secours, built by Ritchot and his parishioners in 1875 to thank the Virgin Mary for her divine assistance in 1869.

Alex McArthur goes on to give a description of the Metis warriors who gathered at La Barrière on October 21, 1869 to defend Metis lands and rights:

Although one might laugh at the simple barricade at River Salle, one could not but see that there was among the men gathered round it on that cold October morning an appearance of indignation and earnestness which boded no good for the cavalcade which was wending its way along the old fur trail in Minnesota or Dakota.

These men, as well as those afterwards who joined them, were almost without exception of Indian-French extraction. They possessed and presented more distinctive features of a separate race than did the Half-Breeds of English-Indian origin. In size they were beyond the English average, in height as well as in build generally. The hair, although finer than that of the Indians, was equally dark and glossy and worn tolerably long. The hair of the face was allowed to appear in its natural condition, except where here and there some young man who might have been educated with a view to the priesthood still showed his respect for clerical usage by shaving. The beards were neither long nor full. The complexion, it could be seen, was a blending of both the original races—a swarthy hue, much of which was due to constant exposure to sun and snow. The eyes were dark, large and keen. They all dressed well and usually in cloth of dark or blue shades; of good quality. Their clothes were made in England, and the styles well became them. Vests, however they cared little for; a heavy woolen shirt, loosely buttoned at the chest, supplied the place of that garment.

It was the fashion to wear leggings ornamented slightly, and these being wide, took somewhat from the wearer's height, particularly if only worn from the knee downward, as it cut the leg in two. As cold weather was coming on many of those on the River Salle wore their winter caps; those were quite martial in their appearance being made of the whole fur of the red fox. The skin was merely

³ Alex McArthur, "The causes of the Rising in the Red River Settlement, 1869-70" *Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society, Publication No. 1*, 1882: p. 1.

turned round the wearer's head and the fox tail was then jauntily thrown back over the top.

So far, you have the material out of which no one can doubt good soldiers ought to be made, but when you consider further that all of them had already been accustomed to a semi-military discipline administered by captains of their own selection; that under these leaders they each year went in bands hundreds of miles over the prairie to hunt buffalo, that each man was furnished with arms of the most approved and deadly kind with which he brought down the buffalo at a gallop and that each rode his own horse, it will be seen that no matter what Mr. McDougall may have thought of their ability to keep him out, they may be excused if they thought of trying it.⁴

To mark this success, Father Ritchot placed a rudimentary cross on this spot where the Métis had built their wooden barricade on the road. On the cross was a Latin inscription that read "Digitus Dei est hic" or "God's finger is here." This wooden cross was eventually replaced by a cement cross. In 1906, to commemorate the raising of the barrier or "La Barrière", *L'Union Nationale Métisse de St. Joseph* erected a stone cross near the site of the original barrier by the La Salle River. Today this monument can be seen at Place Saint-Norbert. Across the La Salle River from St. Norbert, at St. Norbert Provincial Heritage Park.



History of Rivière Sale now St. Norbert, Manitoba:

This area south of the Red River Settlement at the point where the Rivière Sale (Dirty River) enters the Red River was, in the 1700s, a seasonal gathering place for Metis because it was the best fishing area in the country. In July and August it was swarming with burbot, jackfish, carp and catfish. The community became a year-round establishment between 1822 and 1825 by former fur trade employees who settled there

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 7.

with their Metis families. For many years their primary occupations were the buffalo hunt, subsistence farming and cartage via the cart routes that radiated out in all directions from the Red River Settlement.

Every year the people from the surrounding area would join the Metis from St. Norbert to journey up the Rivière Sale and on to the buffalo hunting grounds along the Missouri River. They would travel as far as the first range of the Rocky Mountains. They would then return along the Sheyenne River in North Dakota and at the point it joins with the Red River head north again. In the winter this same group would travel to the west to the Lauder Sand Hills on the Souris Plain, a wintering spot for bison. Many of the St. Norbert families also had homes at Oak Lake, just north of the sand hills. In 1857 Msgr. Tache established the St. Norbert area as a parish, which he named in honour of Msgr. Norbert Provencher, the first bishop of St. Boniface.

When the parish was formed its population was about seven hundred. Henry Youle Hind says there were 101 Catholic families and no Protestants. He notes that the location was the starting point for the great buffalo hunts.

Nine miles above Fort Garry, La Rivière Sale joins the main stream. The buffalo hunter's trail to the great south-western prairies on the Grand Coteau de Missouri passes up the south side of this river for a distance of thirty miles, cutting across the large and winding bends of the valley.⁵

It was in St. Norbert that Louis Riel organized the first Metis resistance movement of 1869-70. The Rivière Sale was also renamed as the La Salle River after René Robert Cavalier de la Salle who explored in the Louisiana area and up the Mississippi River.



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⁵ Henry Youle Hind, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858*. London: 1860:208.